

## Chances Are by EvieSmallwood

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**Summary:**

It's all that matters, really; that he loves her and she loves him.  
Everything else is insignificant.

(or: the kids try to throw a dinner party and things go... awry.)

## Chances Are

### Author's Note:

- For [FateChica](#).

Is it another fic? Dedicated yet again to my wife?  
What a shocker!

Serious creds to her though because she helped me come up with this idea and we basically plotted the whole thing in our excitement. YOU'RE AMAZING BABE ILY.

Anyway, this one is definitely longer than most, but I got a little carried away :P

"You guys, I have an idea."

Dustin drops into his customary seat at the lunch table, gaze intense as he eyes them all in turn; waiting for someone to ask '*what's your idea, Dustin?*'.

Max, beside El, huffs. "What's your idea, Dustin?"

He grins, toothily and satisfied. "A dinner party."

It makes them all lean forward, half intrigued and half disgusted at the prospect. "A dinner party?"

"Yes." He slips his tuna sandwich from a brown paper bag and unwraps it from the foil. "And it's gonna be awesome."

"A dinner party," Max repeats, in a deadpan tone. "What are we, thirty?"

"No, but that's precisely my point," he starts chewing. "We're growing up, and we need to start acting like adults—"

"We're seventeen," Will points out.

“And what better way to do it than dress up and eat a hot meal like civilised human beings?”

Max throws her head back, but this last comment gets El’s attention. “Dress up?”

Dustin beams at her. “To the nines,” he confirms.

Mike shifts. He looks suddenly awkward, but there are gears turning in his head; El can tell by the way he starts drumming his fingers on the tabletop, squinting. “And where exactly would we have this party?”

“Your house,” Dustin informs him, and Mike stiffens. “I checked your calendar last Friday; your parents are gonna be out of town all weekend.”

Her boyfriend’s nose wrinkles. “How do you know that before me?”

“I pay attention.”

Mike leans back. “Okay, so what about Holly?”

“They’re taking her with them.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “And you read that on the calendar, too?”

“No,” he glares, “I asked.”

Max frowns. “And what was your excuse for such a weird question?”

He shrugs, already halfway done with the sandwich and too nonchalant for his own good. “I told her us guys would be hanging out,” he says smoothly. “Wanted to know if we had to look after the tot.”

“Don’t call her that,” Mike looks personally affronted on his sister’s behalf.

“She’s three feet tall,” Dustin snaps. “Anyway, I’ll be cooking, so all —”

"Oh, no way," Lucas slams his coke down. "I'll be making the food."

"Excuse me?"

"You bake, I cook," Lucas says, like it's something they've had to go over multiple times (they have). "You can make the vegetables, or something."

Max perks up. "Mashed potatoes?"

Dustin waves this off. "Whatever. Point is, all you guys have to do is show up dressed nice, okay?"

Max squints. "Is this some diabolical plan to round us up and slaughter us?"

At this, El steps in. She places a hand on Max's arm. "Stop," she says. "It's an idea. Sounds more fun than anything we've done in a while, anyway."

The redhead sighs. "Long as there's booze, I'm good."

Will shrugs. "I'll bring music," he offers, and then returns his attention to his disgusting cafeteria pizza.

El glances at Mike, watches the way he hunches over his meal, deep in thought. She places a hand on his bouncing knee and he meets her eyes.

*You okay?*

*Yeah, he manages a half smile. I'm good.*

---

"So what are you doing tonight?"

They're sitting on the bleachers, him behind her with his legs around her shoulders. She plays with his fingers as he half-dozes, face turned up to the sky like some eager sunflower.

"I have that English test to study for," Lucas says.

Max huffs. “That’s cool,” she mutters, sliding further down. Yeah, that’s right. She’s pouting; it’s the first night all week she’s had no homework, and all she wanted to do was suck face in his car. But *no*.

He nudges her arm with his knee. “What’s up, MadMax?”

“Nothing,” she presses a kiss to his fingertips, because it really isn’t *his* fault. If anything it’s Ms. Tyler’s. The woman is a menace to society and young adult relationships.

Lucas leans forward, wrapping his arms around her stomach and pulling her closer. She feels embers glow in her stomach. “Do you wanna skip that stupid dinner party thing and go to the lake?”

The idea is so tempting, she almost says yes. But then she remembers that El’s been jabbering on about it all day, and it would literally crush the kid. “We should go,” she says.

“Yeah?”

There’s something challenging in his tone. “Yeah,” she replies. “Do you not want to?”

“No, it’s not that,” he jerks his head away as she turns to him suddenly. “I just...”

“What?”

“I mean, it’s not like you’re gonna dress up, or anything—”

“Who said that?”

“Uh, logic?”

“Uh, stupid?” She whacks his thigh (his muscular thigh that she would like very much to be on top of with her tongue down his throat—). “I’d do it.”

Lucas rolls his eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“I will.”

What's his deal? Does he really not think she'd dress up? She's worn... nice stuff before. Blouses and skirts. She can do formal.

"It's a dress, Max," Lucas gives her an *'I-Think-You're-Gravely-Mistaken'* look. "I've never seen you wear a dress once."

"Well, this time I will."

"Uh-huh."

"I *will*, Lucas."

"Yup."

"Lucas." She puts her hand on his cheek and makes him look at her, and then suddenly who cares about dresses.

His lips crash onto hers, and Max melts. Lucas pulls her into his lap, all strong and firm, lips pliant beneath her own. She loves him. It's something she's been thinking a lot, lately, but never really been able to say.

He might be the first person she's ever loved so much.

Max draws back. "I'll wear a dress," she says firmly.

"Uh-huh," he breathes, before kissing her again.

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The bell rings as they enter the small shop, inhaling the smell of dust and moth-ball riddled old clothing.

El cranes her neck to see above the stacks of boxes and books. "Is anyone even here?"

"Who *cares*," Max takes her by the arm and drags her to the back, where the dresses are. "Let's just get our shit and go."

El rolls her eyes, but starts flicking through the racks anyways. Most of the stuff is all shiny, metallic, too short or too ruffly—easily ruled out in El's book.

"I want something classic," she confesses.

"Classic?"

"Like, '50s, y'know?"

The image that comes to mind—Joyce in her high school winter formal dress, smiling for the camera with El's dad's arm around her (back when they'd been stupid teenagers trying hard not to be in love)—makes her smile just a little.

Max hums. "What if I wore all black?" She muses. "That'd piss Lucas off."

"Are you seriously dressing up just to spite him?"

Max grins. "Sort of."

El's hand makes contact with something smooth. She pulls it from the rack and holds it against her body. "What about this?"

"For you?"

"For *you*," El corrects. "I like it."

"It's... bright." Her nose wrinkles as she fingers the skirt, but after a minute her head cocks with genuine curiosity. "How much?"

"Who cares?" El asks, but they both look for the tag. \$16.

She chews her lip. "Alright, let me try it on."

Max makes a big show of being begrudging as she steps into the changing room and shuts the curtain.

El amuses herself by searching the racks some more. She has pink in mind (the first colour she'd fallen in love with; the colour she'd been wearing when *they* fell in love, when he kissed her for the first time, when she knew she'd found home).

She doesn't find pink, though.

She finds perfect.

Max slaps the curtain back. Her hair is curtaining her face, so El can't see her expression until she steps in front of the mirror.

It doesn't matter, though; she's already crying. She's never been this emotional shopping for clothes before.

"Oh, Max," she breathes.

Max turns to look at her, lips twitching upward ever-so-slightly—which means she's fighting hard not to smile. "Yeah," she nods. "I know."

El lets her have a moment, quietly drawing the dress she knows is the one off the rack, along with a few others.

She tries it on in the room and looks down at herself, deciding it cinches her curves in all the right places and flairs just the way she wants it to. Then she slips it off, sets it aside, and tries on another to show Max.

Sometimes things are best kept secret.

---

It's half past four when she gets to Mike's house, just like they planned; arrive early, get ready, set the table.

She lets herself in, glancing down the street to make sure no one is watching before twitching her head and undoing the lock. It's half of what she uses her powers for, these days, it seems like.

Her dress is wrapped—the real one, not the twelve dollar thing she'd bought in front of Max. She's determined to not let anyone see it; not yet, anyway.

"El?"

Mike comes into view, looking half done up. His hair is still wet from a shower and he's wearing an untucked white button down with black slacks. She figures the whole thing will look... well, probably better than she can imagine, when it's all done.

He grins. "You look gorgeous," he says.



El sculpts her face into a mask of fake exasperation. "I'm not even wearing makeup," she says.

"Still look gorgeous," he returns, and it's all sincerity.

She kisses his cheek as she passes him. "I'm gonna take a shower."

"Can I join you?"

"No," she stops midstep and gives him what she hopes is a firm stare, even though she knows he's half-kidding. "I'd like to actually get clean, thank you."

Half-kidding being the key word; he slumps in defeat. "And here I was, thinking we were gonna act out the whole domestic shebang."

"We are," she nods. "Minus the banging."

Mike snorts a laugh, which El takes as her queue to leave. She knows her way around, setting up the shower with ease—only she uses the master bath rather than Mike's, because for one, it's cleaner, and... that's really it.

It takes her about half an hour to get clean, dry, and about a quarter of her makeup done. By this time, she can hear people moving around downstairs. A voice that sounds like Dustin yells at someone, most likely Lucas.

El pins back her hair in a bun; it's the most mature style she can manage with her untameable mess of curls. Some still escape, but they frame her face in a not-so-awful way. El counts it as a success.

And then, the only thing left.

She steps into it, only managing to get it half zipped before someone knocks on the door.

*Please just be Max, be Max, be Max—*

"It's Mike," his voice calls. "Are you decent?"

She rolls her eyes. "Like it matters," she mutters, before letting him in

without moving an inch from her spot.

He drops whatever he's holding—she doesn't know what it is, but then he's ducking after it without taking his eyes off of her.

“Holy shit,” Mike breathes.

It's simple, really. Pale blue, with a sweetheart neckline made of tulle—it's all tulle, and tea length, just like in the movies. There's a thin overlay of lace that covers the bodice and about half the skirt.

It's simple, but it's perfect. Especially because he looks like someone slapped him across the face (with happiness; slapped across the face with happiness).

“You look...”

She's expecting beautiful, or amazing, or fantastic.

He says: “Pretty.”

And it's somehow so much better.

The door closes behind him. Mike moves slowly toward her, taking in the sight, she guesses. And it's great, because it allows her to memorise every inch of how he looks.

Tall, and sharp, and dark. His hair is out of his face, half gelled but still curling. He bites his lip as his dark eyes grace her form, up and down.

“Really pretty,” he decides, and she wants to sob.

Instead, she settles for a watery smile. “You're not so bad, yourself.”

He looks so warm in the golden light of this too-big bedroom. Mike reaches out and grabs her hand. “Don't cry,” he pleads. “Seriously, don't.”

She manages to dab the tears from her eyes before they fall. Mike is studying her hand, thumb brushing over her ring finger (and she realises very suddenly that this is her left hand), before he seems to

make a decision. Then he's bringing it to his lips and kissing her knuckles, and she's not sure how her body maintains a solid form.

El's face burns. Her eyes burn. Her skin burns. Everything burns because he sets her on fire. He's warmth; that's what he's always been. From the moment he met her he was taking her out of the cold, enveloping her in everything good; in home, in happiness, in love. His touches are like embers and his kisses alight the kindling in her stomach. He will never not be the first person she seeks, never not be the first person who really cared. Who wrapped her up in his coat, gave her his sweater, made her a fort. She remembers the yellow light, and his hand on her arm—where the tattoo still stands out starkly, not hidden with concealer tonight.

"Why are you crying?"

He looks so genuinely confused, bringing his hand to her cheek to wipe it. It's an air-brush of a touch, but it still makes her shiver.

"Hey," he cups her face in both hands. "Shortstack?"

This is all it takes to draw a sob out of her. She takes a steadying breath right after, though, because she won't ruin this. She's not even sad; she's just so overwhelmed with him that she can't do anything else.

"I just love you," she mutters. "God, I'm being dramatic."

"No," he shakes his head. Then he leans in and presses the lightest kiss to her lips; it's barely a graze, but the contact wakes her up.

"Sorry," she says. "Did you need something?"

"Yeah, actually," he gives her a half-smirk (key word being gives, because every second with him is a gift, everything he does is exciting and amazing, being with Mike Wheeler is like Christmas everyday). "I got you this."

An actual, tangible thing is held out to her.

It's a locket—silver and heart shaped, with the smallest little details on the front. It looks like a rose, etched into the metal.

“Mike.”

“Yeah, I know,” he nods solemnly, “I’m a complete sap, I’m too mushy—”

“No,” she grabs whatever part of him she can hold; his neck and his forearm. “You’re perfect.”

It hovers on the tip of her tongue, just then. It really does. All she has to do is ask. But then,

“Turn around?”

“Right, yeah,” she nods, turning, and then remembers *oh yeah, my dress isn’t zipped up.*

Mike doesn’t mention it, though. The feather-light weight of the locket is placed on her collarbones, and she watches from the mirror as he fumbles with the clasp for a minute like the awkward dweeb he is, tongue poking out from between his lips.

Then the awkwardness passes, and it’s all smooth, bold moves. His arm wraps around her waist and pulls her against his chest, and he sweeps straggling hairs away from her neck. Mike presses kisses against her skin—ones that mean something. They mean *I love you*, they mean *I’d die for you*, they mean *please don’t ever leave me*.

He stops between her shoulder blades. Her eyes flutter back open.

Mike zips the dress all the way up, retracts his arm, and steps back. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” she tells him. *I’m gonna wear this until the day I die.*

It’s instinctual, whatever drives her to do what she does next; a quick twirl in front of him, skirt fanning out and then falling back into place.

Mike looks like someone handed him the moon. He gives a dramatic sigh and falls back against the bed. “*Jesus.*”

El grins. She leans over him, but stays off the bed because she knows

that even if her friends are downstairs and they have a dinner to eat there's no way joining him there is a smart move. "Get up, string bean," she says.

"Come down here."

"No," she withdraws as quick as she can.

Mike pouts at her. El hovers over the vanity, gaze landing on a pair of silver earrings. They're shining and simple—ornate squares encrusted with diamonds. "Think she'd mind?"

Her boyfriend shakes his head. "Go for it."

---

When El comes downstairs, Max is beyond shocked.

It's not that she didn't think the other dress looked great, or doubted that El can clean up nice, but *damn*.

No wonder she'd been a scheming wastoid about all of it.

Mike takes one look at her and nearly drops the pan he's holding. "Holy fucking shit."

"You *just* saw me," El points out.

"Yeah, twenty minutes ago, and without the walking down the stairs effect."

Max spares one half glance at him and knows it's totally gonna be scorched into Wheeler's memory forever; the whole damn look. His face is all red and glowing like someone is shining the actual fucking sun on it.

"You didn't tell me you were trying to kill him," Max says wryly.

El shrugs. "It was a surprise."

Max turns her attention to the gravy on the stovetop, deciding to just give them their moment.

That, of course, is when Lucas walks in. He'd been getting ice or something when she'd come in, and then he'd been in the bathroom when she'd gone to find him elsewhere, and the whole thing had felt very *Leave It To Beaver*.

His jaw drops, *damn fucking straight*.

"Uh..."

"That's right, Sinclair," she slaps the wooden spoon of brown residue against the side of the pan, "it's your lucky day, your girlfriend in a fucking dress. Put it on just for you, just to show you I could without exploding—"

She doesn't have time to decide if she's really mad or not, because he's kissing her.

Like, forceful, deep, impassioned kissing, and she hopes to god Mike and El left already.

Because she's not pushing her man away. Not when he's groaning against her mouth and threatening to ruin her hair with his hands.

She feels... beautiful. She's felt like this before, of course. Sometimes in nothing more than streetclothes and no makeup, if she happens to catch her reflection right, but this...

In this yellow dress with the little cream flowers, with his hand on her hip and his eyes hungrily devouring every inch of her, and—

"Lucas—"

"Hmm?"

"Lucas, the gravy."

He jerks away with a gasp, lunging for the pot. It's boiling over, all thick and congealed and disgusting. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

The pan is tossed into the sink. Max frowns at it, disappointed.

"I thought we'd established that you can't cook for shit?"

Max throws her head on his shoulder. "One day," she promises, "I'm gonna make you the best gravy your sorry ass has ever tasted."

---

Dinner, it turns out, isn't awful.

The pot roast is perfect, because Lucas is nothing if not utterly meticulous. No one really wants gravy with it, anyway, so it all works out.

Halfway through the meal Wheeler busts out the wine, though, and that's when things get... hectic.

It makes them all talk faster—cheeks flushed after a glass or two, eyes widening just slightly. Max knows she can't hold liquor for shit; none of them really can. She's only been stone cold drunk once before in her life and it hadn't been pretty (but it also really hadn't taken much).

"What the fuck is this fork for?"

Dustin holds it up for inspection.

"It's a salad fork," El snaps. "It's for salad."

"But we don't have any of that," Will giggles. He hasn't stopped giggling for a while. "Why would we need... a salad fork..."

El closes her eyes and counts to three, trying to collect her patience. Apparently wine makes her angry, or at least short tempered. It's good to know, if Max is ever in need of a wing-woman or a body guard.

"You work your way from the outside in," she says, like she's quoting from a book. "The smallest meal to the biggest meal. Typically you start with a soup or a salad. We started with neither, because we have no class."

"No class?!" Dustin scoffs. "Class? *Class?! Oh my god, physics. You guys I'm gonna fail physics.*"

"Calm down, man." Lucas leans back in his chair, completely

composed. “You bombed one quiz.”

Anyone who’s never seen him wasted before (aka, everyone in the room) is probably assuming he hasn’t even touched his glass; but Max knows he’s one step away from showing it. She can see it in the cloudiness of his eyes and the way he takes a little longer than normal to blink.

El is quietly seething, stabbing her meat with a fork and shoving her face. Who the hell knows what she’s so angry about, but it’s fucking *funny*. Max can’t help but laugh.

El catches her eye, looking completely baffled, but Max keeps laughing; sliding sideways in her chair, holding onto the table for support.

It takes five seconds for El to burst into giggles. Their hands reach out, clasping the other, and their eyes fill with tears.

Max does all she can to sober up. She draws in sharp, deep breaths and manages to straighten out.

Lucas’s elbow lands in a bowl of mashed potatoes.

“Oh my god, my potatoes!”

Will squints. “Dustin, we’ve been eating them.”

“That’s not what he *meant*.”

Max exchanges a wry glance with El before topping off both of their glasses.

“Can we just...” she shakes her curly head. “Can we go into the living room and have coffee like grown ups or something?”

Max nods sagely. “I need coffee,” she agrees.

And that’s how they end up sprawled out over the Wheelers’ furniture, with three bottles of cheap wine between all of them. Mike had waved it off when Max expressed concern over drinking too much. ‘My mom stocks up like twice a day, it’s fine.’



She doesn't know if it was an exaggeration or not, but Karen Wheeler does have a lot of wine.

There's no coffee.

Lucas is sitting on the couch, head thrown back and breathing softly. He still looks smart and dashing even with his jacket gone and his tie falling out of its knot.

She rests her head on his chest and listens to his steady heartbeat. It's a constant, for her. She could lay with him and hear his sound and never feel anything but peace.

Dustin and Will are muttering to one another; quietly bickering about D&D or science homework or something. Will's brow is furrowed, but he's grinning, and every once in a while a sharp giggle breaks through their conversation. It makes Dustin laugh, and loudly.

But that's not enough to break the silence. It's solemn in nature, and Max isn't sure why, but she thinks it might have to do with Mike.

He's sitting on the rug in the middle of the floor with his arms on his knees, staring at the empty fire pit and frowning. His head is cocked, like he's thinking about something, and El is staring at him from the Lay-Z-Boy like she wants to cry.

Max rolls her eyes. "You okay, Wheeler?"

"Hmm? What? Yeah." He shakes his head and brings the bottle to his lips. "I was gonna do something, I just can't remember what it was."

His gaze lands on El. "It was something to do with you," he nods. "I don't know."

Mike swallows thickly, at almost the same time she does, and honestly it's entrancing to watch. She'd never even *think* that if she wasn't drunk, but *fuck*. They're glued onto each other with eyes full of tears.

And then Wheeler starts rambling. "Y'know, that year without you sucked... so much. Like, I don't know how I made it. One time I went out to the quarry, and I got really close to the edge, and I thought,

'She saved me last time. There's no way she'd let me die.' But I couldn't..." he sucks in a sharp breath. "I couldn't do it, because then I was wondering, *what if she's really dead?* And then I hated myself for thinking that, and... I missed you."

His chin wobbles, and the tears are already spilling over by the time El drops to his side. She puts both hands on his cheeks, and Max can't breathe because she's never really seen them like this.

"Now I have to do it again," he whispers. "I don't wanna lose you."

"Stringy," she shakes her head, "you won't, okay? You *won't* lose me."

This means something to him. He nods, a hand coming up to clasp her wrist, and closes his eyes. They sit with their foreheads resting against each other's.

It's all so sad; too sad for Max. She blinks away her tears and crawls from Lucas's arms, over to the stereo Will brought. She shuffles through the mixtapes until she comes across one labelled 'loud', and clicks play.

The silence is blasted away with vibrations of sound. *Should I Stay Or Should I Go*, of course, is the first song on the track. Max is half certain it's on like every playlist no matter the genre.

She turns around and sees Lucas and Dustin in each other's arms and dancing, singing along to the song even though the lyrics slur together and they sound like shit. Will watches them and giggles. His eyes are dropping. Jesus, he's laughing himself to sleep.

Mike and El are nowhere to be found.

---

He'd thrown her over his shoulder as soon as the song started playing, standing wobbly. She'd squealed and protested but it could barely be heard over the music.

Then he carries her out of the living room, and it's just her and him, him and her.

Up the stairs, through the now dark house. She keeps making feeble protests and asking him to put her down, but they both know she could easily do that herself.

They reach a bedroom—which one, he isn't completely certain; it's so dark and the layouts are sort of similar and what's his or Nancy's or his parent's sort of gets mixed up in his brain—and he throws her down on the mattress.

She grunts lightly. "How dare you," she grouses, "you could've messed up my dress."

Mike hums. Him and her, her and him. All that matters. He runs a hand up her side and feels her shiver beneath him.

*What the hell was I gonna do?* He wonders.

Then he's not wondering anything at all as she threads her fingers through his hair and kisses him. Deeply; hard and desperate, the kind where she's moaning right away. They both are.

"Mike," she gasps. It makes his stomach fill with stupid butterflies, and he starts trailing his mouth down her jaw and neck. It's messy and clumsy, but she's so responsive.

Her legs clench tightly around his waist, layers of blue fluffy tulle separating them. Mike grabs her by the waist and *pulls*, dragging her down about an inch so that her lips are just beneath his. This kiss is all passion. Her tongue graces his, and his eyes flutter closed. *Shit*.

It's almost like slipping into another reality, kissing her; there's nothing else, just the smell of her perfume and her lips (warm and still sweet from her chapstick), and her hands raking through his hair against his scalp. She's absolutely intoxicating. He's half convinced it's not even the wine that's got him so out of sorts; it's her.

Mike works his way down her neck, this time going in a straight line from her mouth, southward until he reaches her chest. He can feel her heartbeat; it's *racing*. Mike noses a bit of the tulle out of his way, exposing the dip in her chest, and sucks against her sternum.

She groans. Loudly. Her back arches just the slightest bit, and *fuck*

does that drive him crazy.

He's full of longing. He wants her, all of her, and there's not much his buzzed mind can come up with to convince him that *hey, you shouldn't do that right now*.

El doesn't help. Her nails dig into his back, before stripping off his jacket. "Mike," she breathes again. There's something so hopeful in her tone; she's eager and panting and right here beneath him, and all he can think is *why the fuck not*.

She fumbles with the buttons on his shirt. Mike rakes his teeth against her collarbone, hearing her moan—

Only it's *not* a moan. It's a light snore. Her hands are suddenly limp against his half-undressed torso, and her eyes are closed.

He has to admit, he's a little disappointed. But also, she looks fucking cute.

Mike rolls his eyes, before pressing his lips to her brow. Then he rolls off of her, instead settling beside her and wrapping an arm around her waist. He pulls her as close as he can get her, brushing her nose with his.

He'll never get over how perfect this is.

---

Max is on his back, singing as loud as she can. Lucas carries her around the living room, trying and failing to bust moves given her added weight.

Dustin is dancing while standing on the couch. They're all sweaty and she's pretty sure her makeup has been smudged and melted off by now.

*"It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you! There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do!"*

Dustin jumps off the couch. *"I BLESS THE RAINS DOWN IN AFRICA —"*

*"Gonna take some time to do the things we never had!"*

Max laughs loudly at Lucas's purposefully falsetto voice. She laughs so hard she actually falls off of him, landing thankfully on the Lay-Z-Boy.

Lucas leans over her. "You know," he says, as Dustin flails behind him, "you look beautiful. I don't know if I said."

He has. About seven times. But this time, it's not some intemperate mumble. He really means it.

"Thank you, babe."

Lucas smiles, kisses her cheek, and then goes to join Dustin. It's then that Max hears it; a sharp contrast to the beat of the music.

The *doorbell*?

It's unmistakable. The sound comes about three more times.

"You guys, I'll be right back!"

Max stumbles through the hall, grabbing an abandoned bottle along the way, and just makes to the front door before the bell is rung again. She yanks it open, and *oh no*.

"I fucking knew you'd be responsible for this, Mayfield."

"Steve," she takes a sip. "How's things?"

Hopper lets out that *oh my god someone kill me* sigh, pinching the space between his brows. "Of all of the people," he says. "Of all of the kids I thought I'd have to bust for breaking noise ordinance hours, you guys were the last on the list."

"He's very disappointed," Steve nods.

Max nods. She doesn't have much to say, mostly because she feels very suddenly like vomiting, and the way their doubled faces keep blending together really doesn't help.

“Give me that,” Steve snaps, plucking the wine from her hands. “Oh my god, Almaden?! All of this for garbage?”

“It’s not that bad,” she protests, swallowing the bile in her throat.

“Alright, move over,” Hopper brushes her aside, always surprisingly gentle given his gruff attitude. It might be because she’s wasted that she flinches anyway, or maybe it’s just second nature at this point. She knows both of them notice, but they don’t comment. It’s good. She doesn’t need their pity.

Max trails along behind them. They take in the sight of Lucas and Dustin still dancing, blissfully unaware, and Will passed out. He’s now half on the floor (probably having been jostled too much).

“Alright,” Steve clicks the pause button, “party’s over.”

“Oh, Max,” Dustin puts a hand over his heart, “strippers? You shouldn’t have.”

Lucas goes from being frozen on the spot to bursting with laughter.

Steve looks weirdly proud. “Get off the coffee table, you... minor.”

Dustin huffs. “Yeah, okay.”

Hopper rolls his eyes at all of them. “Where’s my kid?”

“Probably off losing her virginity with Mike,” Dustin jibes.

“She already lost that,” is the first thing past Max’s lips. Horrified, oh my god I can’t believe myself, she claps a hand over her mouth.

Hopper grunts, sounding almost like he’s been stabbed. “Okay,” he breathes in, and then out. “I’ll be right back.”

---

It takes a little while to find them, because they’re not even in Mike’s bedroom; they’re curled up together on Karen and Ted’s bed, with his arm draped over her stomach and their legs all tangled and really, Hopper tries to be mad, but it’s fucking *cute*.

At least she has this. She deserves this. After all the shit she's been through, he won't fault her for being in love.

That goes for Wheeler, too.

Hopper makes his decision, then. He softly closes the bedroom door and descends the stairwell, slipping back into a mask of intimidation (the stupid sappy smile is hard to kill, but he manages it somehow).

They're all still gathered in the living room. Steve is giving Dustin a lecture about getting drunk, which is probably pointless because the kid won't remember it anyway.

"Alright, here's the situation," he says, and all eyes snap to him. "You idiots are gonna stay the night, and you can go home tomorrow. I don't want anyone driving, so I'll be taking your keys."

"How are we supposed to get home?"

Henderson's face scrunches up. "Lucas, you live fifty feet away."

"I'll give you two a ride," Steve offers. "And Little Byers."

Hopper sighs. He hates that he loves them all. "Just... don't be stupid, no more noise. Watch TV, or something."

"TV," Max echoes.

Steve glares. "No porn."

"I-I never said porn," she snorts. "Porn. Please."

"Okay," he has to get out. He'll never leave if he doesn't and he knows it. "We're going."

"So you're not busting us?"

"No," Hopper drags Steve away from them by the shoulder. "But I *will* kick your ass if I get another complaint."

They all nod, thoroughly scolded (or maybe they've just gotten good at acting that way).

He fingers a cigarette out of his pocket as soon as the door is shut behind them.

*Gonna be the death of me, he decides. All of them.*

---

The numbers on the clock read 3:15 in green digital letters. This is how she knows they're not in Mike's room, because his clock always reads red.

He's all curled up, freckles hardly visible unless she gets that close. El runs a hand through his hair. It's slick, and pretty. She breathes him in; mostly clean but a little musky, a little sharp with the alcohol.

"String bean," she whispers. "Wake up."

"I am awake," he replies.

El presses her nose against his cheek. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Falling asleep," she winces, knowing it probably sucked.

Mike just shrugs, though. "It happens," he says.

El hums. She feels her stomach rumble lightly and then grabs him by the wrist, pulling him off the bed despite his protests.

They hadn't been under the covers, but their shared body heat had been enough. The cool night air is a sharp contrast, enveloping her bare shoulders and sockless feet.

She leads him downstairs. They half-stumble, going slowly like kids just learning to walk. The carpet is still an ugly shag blue, but she loves it.

Mike flicks on the lights above the peninsula. Sterile fluorescence fills the room. El can see all of their friends piled up in the living room, curled into each other. Dustin and Lucas are both snoring.

Mike retrieves a box of eggos from the freezer, pops them in the



toaster, and she goes about making coffee.

It feels right. *Domestic*, she thinks he'd said earlier. They know when to step around one another and where all the utensils rest.

It's not exactly an ego extravaganza, but it has whipped cream.

She perches on the counter, and he stands between her legs. He looks all charming and old fashioned with his sleeves rolled up and his hair starting to seriously curl against the gel.

"Have fun?"

El shrugs. "I think I only remember like half of what happened."

Mike grins. "I cried in front of everyone."

"You did?"

"About you," he opens his mouth to accept the eggos she offers. "Because I'm weird and clingy when I'm drunk."

"You're *always* weird and clingy," she kicks his knee with her foot. "I like it, though."

Mike shakes the whipped cream can and squirts some in his mouth; too much, which she points out. He chases after her and even though she tries to squirm away, he presses his mouth against her neck.

"Gross."

"No," he kisses her neck, *oh my god he's licking it off her skin*. "Yummy."

The plate almost falls out of her hands. She manages to keep her grip, *somehow*, stomach flipping.

Mike kisses her cheek, and then her lips. He tastes sweet. "Oh my god."

El pulls back, startled by his tone. "What?"

"I just remembered what I was gonna do." His eyes go all bright and

gleaming, and he grins. “I can’t *believe* I forgot.”

“Forgot what?”

She really does drop the plate this time. Thankfully it’s only plastic—one of Holly’s.

He’s holding a ring.

*The ring.*

She can’t breathe. She can’t think. Ring. Him. Dark, hopeful eyes.

“It was gonna be super cheesy,” he says. “Everyone there, and all that. I think I was getting ahead of myself, but... I don’t want to put you in a situation where you have to say yes because our friends are watching, you know?”

El swallows. “You bought that for me?”

She thinks there might be tears in her eyes. Mike nods, and half-shrugs. “Anything for you, shortstack,” he says, and she *really* just can’t breathe at all.

“You need to unzip my dress.”

Mike laughs, but he looks nothing if not flummoxed. “What?”

“Just a little,” she shakes her head, “I can’t... air...”

“*Oh*,” he reaches behind her and undoes the zip about a quarter of the way, but it’s all she needs to re-fill her lungs. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise, you...” she can’t even think of an insult. “Can I try it on?”

“Yeah,” he moves, grabbing her left hand, and slides it onto her finger. It fits, maybe because he thought ahead to figure out her size or maybe it’s just fate.

And it really is beautiful. A golden band, with a single diamond. It’s simple but perfect and she thinks she might explode.

"You don't have to say anything," Mike tells her, running a hand up and down her arm. "I just wanted you to have it. I mean, it's yours. Whether we get married or we don't, y'know?"

She nods. She's crying, and she really doesn't care. She can't help it at all.

He's the only one for her, the only one who understands her, the only one she really loves like this. She won't ever change her mind about that.

God, she could just...

"You know, you make it really hard," she says.

"What?"

"Saying no," El flexes her fingers, watching the diamond glint.

Mike bites his lip. "Why do you?"

"It's just..." El hesitates. She can't explain. She can't articulate for shit right now. "I'll know. I think... I will soon."

Mike accepts that. He takes her hand and laces their fingers together. "Are you gonna wear it?"

"Not yet," she shakes her head.

"What if..." he frowns down at the ring, and then with raised eyebrows he slips it from her finger (is this okay?), before undoing the clasp on her locket and slipping it down the chain. The ring lands right next to the silver heart, and he lifts it, tucking it into her dress. "How about that?"

"Yeah," she nods. *I love you I love you I love you.* "That works."

Then she buries her face in his chest, and he holds her. She'll know soon, she thinks. She doesn't know when (within months), or why (his laugh) or where they'll be (together).

She just knows it'll happen.

(and it'll be perfect.)

### **Author's Note:**

Hmm... seems like something is happening and very soon...

Writing these kids drunk is just so much fun.

This, by the way, is El's dress (at least, it's how I picture it, but everyone's imagination works differently):

<https://www.bluevelvetvintage.com/50s-Strapless-Baby-Blue-Lace-and-Tulle-Tea-Length-Party-Wedding-Dress.html>

And this is Max's:

<https://www.bluevelvetvintage.com/50s-Emma-Domb-Chamois-Yellow-Flocked-Organza-Prom-Party-Dress.html>

And THIS, my dudes, is ~t h e r i n g~:

[https://www.1stdibs.com/jewelry/rings/engagement-rings/diamond-solitaire-engagement-ring-18-carat-gold-050-carat-round-brilliant/id-j\\_3653361/](https://www.1stdibs.com/jewelry/rings/engagement-rings/diamond-solitaire-engagement-ring-18-carat-gold-050-carat-round-brilliant/id-j_3653361/)

I just about died when I saw it. Anyway, thank you guys so much!!!! Love you <3

Also, come yell at me on tumblr! My url is @madmaxinemayfield!